Social and technological influences on engagement with personal memory objects: a media roles perspective

Social and Technological Influences on Engagement with Personal Memory Objects: A Media Roles Perspective

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Abstract
The same roles adopted by people involved in mass media enterprises, such as producers or distributors of feature films, are involved in practices surrounding personal memory artefacts such as photographs, home videos or diary entries. When the social context of such practices changes, these roles are renegotiated in relation to the people with whom we communicate and the tools we use to help us. A pilot study combined an analysis of sets of photographs taken by different participants at the same event – a wedding – with interviews that explored the phenomenological experience of engaging in memory practices connected to these photo sets. Focusing on personal photography, seven media roles were selected as a framework for examining changes in artefact-related memory practices due to shifting socio-cultural contexts and technological affordances. These roles – Creator, Director, Archivist, Gatekeeper, Distributor, Consumer and Critic – were found to be useful in highlighting individual differences in capturing, organising, reviewing and sharing photographs amongst people with varying technological engagement in varying social groupings. Preliminary findings suggest that technological affordances and constraints can change the social and cultural context of communication as well as personal goals of media production and consumption. Different media tools create subjective triggers and barriers for the adoption of roles, making some processes of media production or consumption easier or more accessible to certain types of people while other processes may become more complex or culturally inappropriate. These triggers and barriers, in combination with a continuous reconfiguration of related cultural norms, affect the adoption of roles and these roles directly affect engagement with memory artefacts. This paper forms part of a larger project that aims to explore how our changing engagement with technology is affecting our individual and collective memory practices.

Key Words: Digital photography, media roles, memory practices.

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1. Memory Artefacts and Practices

As part of a wider 'Blended Memory' project that looks at the influence of technology on what we remember of our lives, this paper describes the methodology and some preliminary results of a study into digital photography practices as a focus for exploring interaction with personal memory artefacts. Photographs and interview data were collected from six people a year and a half

after they attended a civil partnership wedding in the United Kingdom. These people, drawn from a pool of more than 100 attendees, included the bridal couple, the official photographer and three guests.

The primary aim of the study was to discover the practices people engaged in with respect to digital photography during and after the wedding. Four key memory practices were derived from previous work,[1] including capturing (i.e. taking photos), organising (downloading onto computers, uploading to websites, deleting, editing, annotating, sorting), reviewing (looking at photos) and sharing (showing photos to others either face-to-face or remotely). The exploration of these practices was in line with Atkinson and Coffey's requirement that the analysis of self-documentation practices produce 'a clear understanding of how documents are produced, circulated, read, stored and used.'[2]

A secondary objective was to map the ways in which technology could be seen to interact with those practices. Such interaction is generally most visible in the form of related cultural conventions that arise as technologies are adopted. These conventions create triggers and barriers to behaviour that privilege certain sites of image production, composition and audiencing,[3] thereby affecting the nature of personal photographs as well as what people do with them.

The practices of capturing, organising, reviewing and sharing are important to the construction of memories that are mediated through personal artefacts. Capturing is implicated in the subjective experience of an event and the encoding of memory. Our experience and, therefore, our associated memories of it, is changed by the act of looking through a camera as well as by the knowledge that the experience is being recorded. Organising involves reflecting on memory artefacts as decisions are made about the categories they belong to or how they might be used. Reviewing involves a different set of reflective processes that impact on the consolidation of memory through rehearsal and reconstruction. Sharing memory artefacts is also implicated in memory consolidation as shared narratives are built around experiences using evidence present in the artefacts.

Although the four practices overlap and are interdependent, it is possible to look at them each in turn in order to focus on what is happening within a social network of which artefacts (in this case photographs) play an active part. To further narrow this focus, the data were analysed using a framework of media roles derived from those documented in the mass media industry.[4] The roles included were Creator, Director, Producer, Gatekeeper, Archivist, Distributor, Consumer and Critic. These roles have been expanded upon in the 'Media Roles and Behaviour' section of this paper to allow them to be understood in the context in which they were applied. There are other applicable roles, (e.g. Performer, Editor, Production Support) which for reasons of scope are not directly discussed in this paper.

2. Interviews and Photographs

The six people interviewed included the bridal couple (both women), the official photographer, a couple who attended as guests (one of whom was the 'Best Woman') and another guest who was not part of a couple. This sample was chosen for convenience and, although it provided a variety of perspectives within the wedding, it was a homogenous group in terms of gender (all female), age (30-45 years old) and socio-economic status (well-educated, middle-class). In addition to interview data, the full photo sets of each participant were also collected. These photo sets consisted of all of the photographs from the wedding that each participant had at the point of interview, whether they had taken the photos themselves or were given them by other people. In total, over 4000 photographs were collected. This included many duplicates across participants but this was necessary to determine which photographs participants ended up with, while the interviews provided insights into how they ended up with them, and what they did with them.

Digital meta-data attached to the photograph files also formed part of the data since it provided additional contextual clues as well as being part of the experience of engaging in digital photography practices. This meta-data showed that the collected photo sets were produced using the following seven cameras: Nikon / D90; Nikon / D3000; Canon / EOS 500D; Canon / EOS 400D; Nikon / Coolpix S620; Panasonic / DMC-TZ5; Fujifilm Finepix Z. The first four of these are categorised on Flickr as 'DSLR' (Digital Single-Lens Reflex) and the other three as 'Point and Shoot.'[5] An example of the meta-data attached to each photograph can be seen in Appendix 1. Readers should note that some of these (e.g. date and time) are sometimes inaccurate due to their reliance on being configured correctly by the camera user.

3. Limitations

There are many ways in which people engage with digital photography and this very small sample only covers a few of them. Further, weddings have a distinct photography culture. They are different from birthdays, holidays or festivals. For example, each person's right to not be in any photographs or to restrict the distribution of photographs in which they are represented, is greatly reduced. It is often culturally unacceptable to refuse to allow photographs of yourself to be distributed to the wedding guests on behalf of the bridal couple.

As such, this study is a preliminary evaluation of the Media Roles framework to determine whether it is worth pursuing with a wider audience and at different types of events. In addition, the analysis generates interesting questions for further exploration.

4. Media Roles and Behaviour

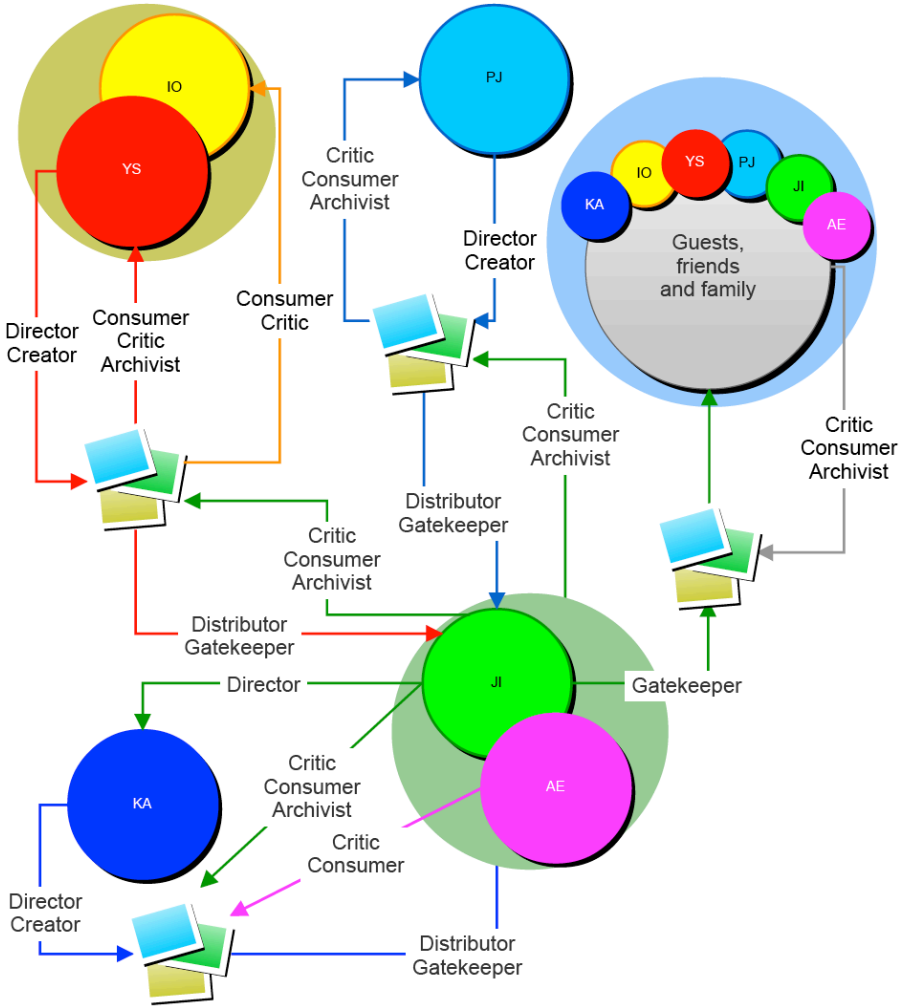

Image 1: Media Roles

Image 1 shows the information flow of photo sets during and after the wedding. JI and AE were the bridal couple, KA was the official photographer, IO and YS were guests who attended as a couple and PJ was a single guest. Three groups (KA; IO and YS; PJ) each created a set of photos (represented by the stacks of

rectangles) and performed a number of related roles around them, including the distribution of photographs to the bridal couple.

The top-left corner of Image 1 shows that YS performed Director and Creator roles, taking photographs on behalf of herself and IO. YS reviewed and evaluated these photographs (adopting the roles of Consumer and Critic respectively) and also organised them into a family photo collection (thereby adopting an Archivist role). Although IO looked at the photographs (Consumer), she showed limited adoption of other roles.

PJ (see the middle of the top of Image 1) took photographs and downloaded them to her computer but did not ever look at them. At this point, she could be said to have performed the roles of Director, Creator and Archivist but not those of Consumer or Critic.

JI was the more active member of the bridal couple in relation to photographs and she performed the role of Director for KA's photo set through her explanation of the types of photos that KA should take (e.g. natural shots, some posed ones of the ceremony and the speeches, etc.). Within this set of instructions, KA was free also to adopt the role of Director, choosing what photographs to take within the parameters set by JI (what angles to take, which moments to capture, etc). When actually taking the photos, KA performed a Creator role. This role is distinct from the Director role in that the Director decides broadly what the photo should be of whereas the Creator actually takes it – this is essentially the same distinction as between a film director and a cameraman.

KA performed a Gatekeeper role on her photo set by deciding which ones were suitable for distribution to the bridal couple. This process also involved adopting the role of Consumer (looking at the photos), Critic (evaluating them) and Archivist (organising photos into folders to send or not send).

After each of these groups (KA; IO and YS; PJ) had Distributed their photos to the bridal couple, JI and AE reviewed them (Consumer), evaluated them (Critic) and performed Archivist roles by renaming, sorting and flagging some to be uploaded to Flickr, some for use in thank you cards, and others for slideshow projection at a family party.

After this, the top-right corner of Image 1 shows that JI became the Gatekeeper of an integrated collection of wedding photos. From this collection, thank you cards containing iconic photographs (e.g. Image 2) and a couple of photos specially chosen for each person were Distributed via post. A different selection of photos was projected onto a wall at a party where wedding guests used them as prompts to share stories with those who could not attend. A larger selection was uploaded to Flickr as a convenient way of widening access. Criticism (in the sense of people forming and expressing opinions) was most evident at the slideshow, where people talked about photos they liked and the memories they prompted. There is some evidence of people looking at the photographs on Flickr but no evidence of online discussion. This platform does not seem to have been attributed much importance

by any of the participants. JI claimed that people enjoyed the thank you cards and that some even had the included photos on mantelpieces or fridges.

Although the analysis is incomplete at the time of writing, this breakdown of media roles according to interview and photo set data has generated a number of insights about the applicability of the framework. Firstly, the roles framework facilitates a fine-grained exploration of personal photography behaviour but does not define the meaning or relative importance of the associated media. For example, the framework does not differentiate between photo reviewing that prompts memory from that which does not. It will be important to the wider Blended Memory project to tie performative aspects uncovered through models such as the roles framework to notions of meaning and value derived from people's interactions with photographs and other memory artefacts.

Image 2: Iconic

Secondly, some performative actions are not covered by the framework. PJ, for example, placed her easy-to-use and relatively inexpensive point-and-shoot camera on the table during the wedding dinner. This facilitated photo-taking by other people who spontaneously picked up and used her camera. Perhaps PJ's role here is one of Production Support, providing equipment for others to Create photos with. This role seems very broad, however, and requires more development before it can be incorporated into a useful model.

5. Media Roles and Phenomenology

Although the Media Roles framework is a system for describing behavioural practices, its application can bring to light phenomenological aspects of the experience of engaging in these practices. Some examples of emerging insights are outlined below.

The bridal couple were not interested in whether anyone had looked at photos online and were unsure who had actually seen their photos as a result.

Image 3: Meaning

> I actually never looked at views on my set, I didn't care, really, who viewed what… I don't even know if there's a comment hidden within the set, actually. *JI*

Flickr was not used for discussion of photographs. This may have related to the social grouping, since JI mentioned that such technologies were inaccessible or unappealing for some guests of her parents' generation. Face-to-Face gatherings like a party for extended family seemed to be more effective at revealing the accounts of different people than online platforms.

> …we got all sorts of random stories from different people cos a lot of the people who were there – all [JI]'s siblings and their in – laws were there as well so there was probably about 20 people who'd been at the wedding and it was quite interesting getting all the different stories from different people. Different pictures tweaked different memories for people. *AE*

When Susan Sontag wrote that 'Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy,'[6] she

hinted at why stories around photographs can be more important than the photographs themselves.

> I'm much more interested in stories and stuff. For me you don't really get those from photos. Photos can bring back memories and stuff like that but seeing them without the story behind them I don't find particularly interesting so I guess I don't tend to make much effort to send them to anyone else. *AE*

AE's words indicate that photographs have different meanings and values for different audiences in different contexts. According to Gillian Rose, the 'site of audiencing' incorporates the personal perspective of the viewer and the context within which the photograph is viewed.[7] Without knowing JI's viewing context, for example, Image 3 does not appear to stand out from the rest. KA (who took the photograph) would not have known it was special. The two men in the picture were not involved in any key aspect of the wedding and the composition was no better than many of the other photos. Yet it was one of JI's favourites because, according to her, it did an excellent job of capturing the personalities of these two people. This highlighted the importance of the interview component of this study, without which much of the context of these images would have been lost.

There was evidence of mythology developing around some stories. Image 4 was one of the bridal couple's favourites. Four participants claimed (independently, and without being asked about it) that all other photos found on the camera of this photograph's Creator were blurred and of poor quality. Yet the digital meta-data of the photo sets showed that six images from this person's camera were chosen for distribution to the wider audience. It seems that the rehearsal of this narrative enhanced the value of this photograph and, perhaps, the memory attached to it.

Image 4: Mythology

Alongside shared narratives, there was other evidence within the interview transcripts that pointed to active memory reconstruction around details present in the photographs. It

seemed to be easier for participants to 'remember that' they did something if they knew that it was something that they were likely to have done under the circumstances. For example, PJ was confident she took the photographs in her collection of JI and AE walking down the stairs at the start of the wedding day. The following extract suggests that PJ may not have remembered actually taking these photos, but may simply have known that it was probable that she took them.

> I think certainly the earlier on ones of JI and AE I took. So the ones with her coming down the stairs… so certainly the first four I would have taken. The first five probably. *PJ*

Returning to Image 4, it is possible that the Creator of this photograph really did have limited knowledge of photography. The automatic settings of new digital cameras make it possible for novice users to capture decent photographs, encouraging the adoption of photography by more people than ever before. PJ's claimed that a Point and Shoot camera is the most likely to be used by people other than its owner due to lowered barriers of expense and complexity as compared with Single-Lens Reflex cameras (SLRs) and lowered barriers of complexity and privacy as compared with mobile phones.

> …I remember her bringing quite a big, fancy camera and it never took a single photograph. And she borrowed my camera a fair bit. But – just the nature of these things – a few other people may be picked up my camera too. It's just a small point-and-snap, a digital, and so… *PJ*

Amidst such democratisation of photography, some participants placed greater importance on technical skills such as exposure and composition than others. The value of a photograph seemed, however, to be most contingent on its purpose (e.g. artistic, communicative, or as a record or memory cue) as perceived by the Consumer. This might have been different from the Creator's intention at the time of capture, as explained by Daniel Kahneman's theory of the experiencing and remembering selves.[8] Kahneman suggests that the identity with which we experience the present has a different set of goals from the identity with which we remember the past. This may be the reason that, although the wedding produced a huge number of photographs, they remained largely unsorted and were generally reviewed only for specific purposes (e.g. as part of an event like the slideshow or for a communicative function like the thank you cards).

Very little time had been spent looking through or sorting photos of the wedding considering how many were taken. Only KA, the official photographer, claimed to have deleted any photographs, despite all participants claiming that some of their photographs were of little value due to poor focus or exposure or

unflattering poses. Developments in digital photography technology have led to the novel situation that it is more expensive (in terms of time) to delete a photo than it is to take it in the first place, a point that Victor Mayer-Schonberger (2009)[9] expands upon in his book Delete: the Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age.

6. Conclusions

It is too early in the analysis to draw firm conclusions. A clear picture of the relationship between digital photography practices and phenomenological experience is yet to emerge. The aim of this study is to generate interesting hypotheses that can be explored in different contexts, as well as to indicate whether the Media Roles framework is worth developing for further use. Current indications are that this is a useful approach, though care should be taken to relate the behavioural aspects it describes with phenomenological aspects uncovered during its application.

Notes

[1] Tim Fawns, 'Blended Memory: The Changing Balance of Technologically-Mediated Semantic and Episodic Memory', in *Navigating Landscapes of Mediated Memory*, eds. Paul Wilson and Patrick McEntaggart (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), 134-145, Viewed 23 March 2012, http://www.interdisciplinarypress.net/online-store/ebooks/digital-humanities/navigating-landscapes-of-mediated-memory.

[2] Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey, 'Analysing Documentary Realities', in *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (London: Sage, 2011), 79.

[3] Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2006), 13-25.

[4] Davis Foulger, 'Roles in Media: Evolutionary Media', last modified 16 February 2003, Viewed 26 October 2011, http://evolutionarymedia.com/papers/rolesInMedia.htm.

[5] 'Camera Finder / All / Nikon / D90', last modified 3 March 2012, Viewed 3 March 2012, http://www.flickr.com/cameras/nikon/d90/.

[6] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 23.

[7] Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 22-25.

[8] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 381-385.

[9] Viktor Mayer-Schonberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 68.

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